

Ṛgvedic Indra and his 'all-dreaded thunder-stone' : A Study in Myth-element and Poetic-symbolism

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apāre kāvyasamsāre, kavirekaḥ prajāpatiḥ |
yathāsmāi rocate viśvaṃ tathā vai parivartate ||
śṛṅgārī cetkaviḥ kāvye jātaṃ rasamayam jagat |
sa eva vītarāgascennīram sarvameva tat ||

(Dhvanyāloka)

One cannot describe the work of a true poet in nobler or, more sublime language than that is quoted above. In the endless world of poetry the poet is the creator, whatever form he fancies to give, the universe appears to get that; whatever sentiment he pleases to put into the soul of his poem, the whole world gets immersed into it. Through this poetic work the poet draws images or characters dipped in the sentiment of love or pathos or heroism. Poetry is an invariable constituent of Indian aesthetics; it is indeed the highest of all arts. Through art, the varied situations of life come to be depicted in certain forms poetry appeals to the ear and through aesthetic experience arising from listening to or absorbing a fine specimen of poetry within, one can visualize the incomplete picture that the poet draws up in the blissful state of his imagination. Actually the artistic creations are reproduced from a poetic vision. Naturalism is very important in this context. The poet transforms the beauty of a fact extracted from life or nature into an artistic form with the magic touch of his imagination or genius, which, according to the author of Vyaktiviveka, is the third eye of the divine lord Śiva by the grace of whom the poet can perceive the things in its past, present and future state. Poetry has the capacity of appealing to those in whom its touch brings about the flood of ideas. True poetry no doubt, embellishes the soul.

The Vedic poets were the conscious artists who by way of revealing different peculiarities in writing, exhibited even such variations in the poetic devices which more or less helped in influencing later Sanskrit literature including Brāhmaṇic and Upanṣadic portion. By the careful choice of words filled with deep inner meaning those poets made a clear distinction between ordinary speech and poetic speech; the latter leading smoothly on to bliss and glory. In one of the most beautiful and sublime Ṛgvedic hymns (X.125) put in the mouth of Vāk herself, the goddess

discloses the power of speech, to the mortals in a vigorously effective and picturesque style.

**aham eva svayam idaṃ vadāmi, juṣtaṃ devebhir uta mānuṣebhiḥ |
yaṃ kāmaya taṃ tam ugraṃ kṛṇomi, taṃ brahmāṇaṃ tam ṛṣim taṃ sumedhām ||**

which means- I verily of myself declare this which is approved of by both gods and men; whomsoever I will, I render formidable, I make him a Brahman, a Ṛishi, or a sage. (Trans. by H. H. Wilson)

The Ṛgveda particularly, contains in it a large quantity of true poetry. The intensity of expression in it confirms the fact that there is definitely a history of its style. Some of the old hymns contain positive element of poetry filled with deep poetic imagination which found expression through Ṛgvedic poet's skill in dealing with symbolism. Those poets often employed different *alaṃkāras*; composed dialogues of highly poetic and imaginative nature; even played with letters or words by repeating which created melodious *anuprāsa* and so on.

Though the conscious artists of the Ṛgveda perfectly displayed their skill in choosing appropriate words to bring out the beauty of figures of speech, particularly the *Śabdālaṃkāras* of an intricate nature are rare on the whole. There is no doubt, abundance of the *Upamā*, the *Utprekṣā*, the *Rūpaka* and the *Atiśayokti*, the last two generally occurring in the limited sphere of the epithets of a deity and though the Ṛgvedic poets showed amazing perfection in using the *Utprekṣā* still, according to S. G. Moghe, " It is often very difficult to distinguish it from *Upamā*." ¹In some mantras the word *iva* has been used to express *asambhāvana*, for example, in VII.7.14 it is used after words like *adhi*, in VII. 18.16, after *api*, in I.37.3 after *iha*, in I.173.3 after *uta* or in X.86.7 after *yathā* and leaves no doubt about the expression of *sambhāvana*. It is generally accepted that one usually looks for an *Utprekṣā* only when *Upamā* is rendered impossible². Though in the Ṛgvedic simile, the four normal components are present, still we can find some *mantras* where a *Luptopamā* or a compound *Upamā* has been appropriately used. In *Luptopamā* the common property is usually dropped and a compound *Upamā* is one with one principal and one or more subsidiary *upamānas*. Again there are some interesting *mantras* which contain a variety of a simple *Upamā*, i.e. consisting of a qualified *upamāna*. On the whole, the Vedic *Upamā* is usually a simple affair. It, in its simplest form, may be

¹ Ed: *Ālaṃkārika Interpretation of the Ṛgveda* : New Delhi, 1993, p. 95

² *ibid*

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called an illustrative simile. Besides there are at least two others which intend to adorn a *kāvya* and at the same time lend a greater charm to it by embellishing its soul by its magic touch. These may be called the Decorative and the Emotional Simile. In the *Ṛgveda* this last type intends to serve a distinct purpose it seems. By using it, the poets tried to appeal to the particular deity's heart in addition to his mind and palate and to win the favour of a deity particularly like Indra. They besides offering him Soma and the like and singing the hymns of praise towards him opened up their minds for love of praise towards him, opened up their minds for love of the deity and composed hymns full of emotional simile where a single *upamāna* or a number of *upamānas* are built with words expressive of an intimate relationship which connotes certain emotions and feelings.

Indra was conceived by the combative Vedic Indian as a supreme model of the warrior class. He is the war-lord and is said to be the commander of the invading Aryan force. The derivation of the word meaning 'kindler' can be found in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*. Regarding the meaning of the word, nothing can be said certainly excepting that as it is unknown it can be understood as 'strong' mighty' derived from *ind* 'equipping with great power' or *inv* 'advance'.³

According to some scholars, He is a Vedic weather-god or sun-god or fertility genius. Again many *Ṛgvedic* hymns praise Indra, as the wielder of the *vajra*, i.e. iron thunderbolt which He displays among other weapons. He was the one to secure supreme position defeating Agni and Sūrya in popularity and the *Taittirīya Saṃhitā* describes him as vying with Viṣṇu, the Yajñapurusa in supremacy.⁴

The worship of Indra was much in vogue during the 7th and 10th centuries of the Christian era. However in later Hinduism his place deteriorated and in course of time He became the chief of the army of the gods and finally as one of the *dikpālas* of the eight regions. In early Hinduism He is regarded as an aspect of Śiva and is worshipped as the *dikpāla* of the east region. This Vedic deity also occupies an important place in Buddhist and Jain religious lore and from Buddhism and Jainism we know that He is understood, except as a *dikpāla*, as a god belonging to an inferior rank and particularly in Jainism each and every heaven has one king of gods whose name is Indra.⁵

³ Gosta Liebert: Iconographic Dictionary of the Indian Religions, Delhi, 1974, p. 107

⁴ T.A.Gopinatha Rao: Elements of Hindu Iconography, II edn., vol. II, pt. II Delhi, 1971, p. 516

⁵ Gosta Liebert, op.cit

Now coming to the Aryan nature of Indra, we find that the Aryans always emerged victorious over the aboriginal inhabitants of Indra whenever aided by Indra, the great god of battle. Primarily the thunder god, He was the dominant deity of the middle region who conquered demons of drought and consequently liberated waters. Here we mention the *mantra* ṚV.1.33.10 -

**na ye divaḥ pṛthivyā antamāpur na māyābhir dhanadām paryabhūvan |
yujam vajram vṛṣabhaś cakra indro nirjyotiṣā tamaso gā adukṣata ||**

While commenting on this *mantra* Sāyaṇācārya writes ...*megham bhivā jalam vṛṣṭavān ityarthah*...They who pervaded earth's extremist limit subdued not with their charms the Wealth-bestower : Indra, the Bull, made his ally the thunder, and with its light milked cows from out the darkness. (Trans. T. H. Griffith) which means, He struck the cloud with his lightning and made the milky streams of fertilizing rain flow forth. In various passages of the Ṛgveda, there can be found frequent imaginary description of clouds and thunderstorm which are moving and which are taking the shape of fortresses (*purah*) of the aerial demons.⁶ The clouds containing the waters are figured as fortresses of the aerial demons. Indra shattered the fortresses⁷ and gained the peculiar appellation *purbhid*, *purandara* etc. In another *mantra* He is described as a fort-shatterer and lover of waters at the same time.

**sadhrīcīḥ sindhumuśatīrivāyan tsanājāra āritah pūrbhidāsām |
astamā te pārvivā vasūnyasme jagmuḥ sūnṛtā indra pūrvīḥ ||**⁸

which means, they hasten associated together to the ocean, like loving wives (to a husband); (Indra) the witherer of foes, the demolisher of cities, is their impeller of old...(Trans. by H. H. Wilson).

Indra carried many epithets like *vajrabhṛt*, *vajrivat*, *vajrin*, *vajradakṣiṇa* etc. and is said to have slain Vṛtras with the bones of Dadhyañc. In the Brāhmaṇa Vṛtra is interpreted as the moon, which was swallowed by Indra who is identified with the sun at new moon. Vajra or the thunderbolt was his chief weapon though sometimes He is said to be armed with bow and arrow.⁹ Mystery and obscurity prevail regarding the origin of *vajra* though some scholars have tried to derive it from the

⁶ ṚV. VIII. 1. 28.

⁷ ṚV I. 51& c

⁸ ṚV X.111.10

⁹ ṚV. VIII. 45.4; 66.6; 11, V.103.2, 103.3

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lightning bolt of Jupiter¹⁰ and according to Gopinatha Rao, its connection with trident both in the single and double form is found in Iconography as representing lightning in ancient times¹¹. The concept of *vajra* as found in Hinduism is much influenced by Buddhism where it has been used in its multifarious aspects. It can destroy everything but is itself indestructible by nature. It is a very peculiar weapon mostly found in the art of Buddhist period and rarely mentioned in Hindu mythology. The *vajra* in the Vedic mythology is a kind of club which is characteristic especially of Indra. *Vajrāsani* is the name of the thunderbolt belonging to Indra.

Now turning to the opinion of the Western scholars we know that according to the Vedic myths, Indra achieved his first great victory immediately after birth. Vṛtra, “the encompasser”, the Demon of Drought - was holding captive in his mountain fortress the cloud-cattle which he had harried in the approved manner of the Aryan raiders. Indra arose heroically to do battle for the sacrificers. The ancient Euro-Asian ‘hammer god’, bearing the tribal name of Indra, accompanied the earliest invading bands of hunting and pastoral Aryans, who hailed with joy the ‘fresh woods and pastures new’ of the Punjab, the green country of ‘Five Rivers’. The primitive hunting and pastoral wanderers may have conceived of a thunder deity engaged in splintering the hills with his stone hammer and fighting demons in the rude manner in which they themselves contended against beasts of prey. Memories of the Stone Age cling to the hammer god. Indra’s bolt was ‘the all-dreaded thunder-stone’¹²; until recently Palaeolithic and Neolithic artifacts were reputed to be ‘elfbolts’ and ‘thunder bolts’ which fell from the sky; in Scandinavian folk lore ‘the flint hills’ are the fragments of the weapon wielded by the thunder giant Hrugner. The bolt or hammer ultimately became an axe and according to the modern Greeks, lightning flashes are caused by the blows of the ‘sky-axe’. But although his name which has been deciphered as “In-da-ra” at Boghaz-Koi in Asia Minor, may belong to the early Iranian period, the Vedic ‘king of the gods’ assumed a distinctly Indian character after localization in the land of the ‘Fire Rivers’; he ultimately stepped from his chariot drawn by the steeds of the Aryan horse tamers, and mounted an elephant; his Heaven, called Swarga, which is situated on the

¹⁰ Gosta Liebert: Iconographic Dictionary of Indian Religion: svsw

¹¹ Elements of Hindu Iconography: vol. I, pt. I, p.8

¹² This particular expression occurs in the song in the play Cymbeline by Shakespeare composed in 1608-09

summit of Mount Meru, eclipses Olympus by reason of its dazzling oriental splendour; his combats are reflections of the natural phenomena of Hindustan. His thunderstone was fashioned by the divine artisan Tvastṛ who resembles the Germanic Mimer, the 'wonder smith'. When Indra drove forth to attack the Drought Demon, the 'hastening Maruts' followed him, dashed towards the imprisoned cows of the clouds and 'chased them aloft'. The dragon Vṛtra roared when Indra drew nigh; where at the heaven shook and the gods retreated Mother Earth, the goddess Pṛthivī was troubled regarding her golden son. But Indra, inspired by the hymns of the priest advanced boldly with the roaring Maruts; he was strengthened by the sacrifices offered on earth's altars and he wielded the thunderstone. Indra cast his weapon on the Drought Demon and soon discovered the vulnerable parts of its writhing body. He slew the monster; it lay prone before him; the torrents burst forth and carried it away to the sea of eternal darkness. Then Indra rejoiced and cried out - I have slain Vṛtra... On the earth the worshippers of the god were made glad.¹³

In many places of the Ṛgveda, Indra is looked upon as the liberator of waters. Accompanied by the Maruts He attacks and smashes Vṛtra who encompassed the waters, or the dragon that lay around (*pariśayānam*) the waters¹⁴ or overcame the dragon lying on the waters, thus opening the mouth of the enclosed waters¹⁵. Elsewhere it has been mentioned that Indra chopped off the shoulders of Vṛtra, the simile employed is noteworthy: the magician produces strength with his spell and holds a Vajra in his hands chopping off the enemy as Indra did with Vṛtra, broke down the castles, made a channel for the rivers which were choked by Vṛtra from going every where and pierced the mountains -

jaghāna vṛtram syadhitirvaneva ruoja puro aradanna sindhūn |

vibheda girim navaminna kumbhamā gā indro akṛṇuta svayugbhiḥ ||¹⁶

Now the fact is, a barrage or dam encompasses naturally and in view of this it may be suggested that Vṛtra originally symbolized the reservoirs of a developed agricultural civilization. According to the Ṛgvedic descriptions, Indra pierced the mountains and released the pent-up waters like imprisoned cows. The nineteenth century scholars looked upon Vṛtra as a demon of drought, confining waters within the clouds. Also according to Yāska and the school of the Nairuktas Vṛtra

¹³ For this concept I am indebted to the Encyclopaedia of Myth and Legend in Art, Religion, Culture and Literature (in 7 vols.) by Donald A. Mackenzie and Charles Square

¹⁴ ṚV. IV.19.2

¹⁵ ṚV.I.32.11

¹⁶ ṚV X.89.7

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represented a cloud. The historians, however, believe that Vṛtra was a demon, a son of Tvaṣṭṛ, Yāska's lead has been followed by a majority of the early Vedic scholars of the modern times - Indra stands at the head of the gods of antarīkṣa and He, the personification of thunderstorm, is verily the rain-god of the Vedic pantheon. Indra smites down the cloud-demon Vṛtra who held back the heavenly waters by means of his Vajra or thunderbolt and releases the waters, which then flew down in the form of rain-showers. But this explanation seems unsatisfactory since thunderstorm and rain are hardly mentioned in the Indra-Vṛtra myth and clouds play quite a minor part in it. As the waters released by Indra are described as running like a horse in a race, rain-waters cannot be meant; it does not flow horizontally. But if a dam or barrage is smashed, the liberated waters could evoke horses in a race.

To summarize from the historical point of view, we may say that with the change in life style of the Vedic Aryans, there could be seen a change in their religion also. So there came to be the transformation of the heroic deeds of Indra to the feats of an all powerful god. Thus Indra came to symbolize the glorious leadership of this heroic enterprise and accordingly came to be recognized by the Vedic people as their principal god. In the process of attributing Indra as the national war-god, there began to come into being a large number of legends pertaining to him; the main centre of focus being his successful encounter with the demon Vṛtra where Indra's feat in releasing the imprisoned cows, water or light have been emphasized. Thus according to R.N Dandekar, 'In other words, though the concept of Indra had its origin in an individual leader of the victorious Vedic Aryans; it soon developed into the concept of a divine personality or institution - representing the sum total of all heroic deeds and achievements'¹⁷.

Into this basic concept of heroic Indra, the Vedic poets breathed the current of mythological thoughts and imagination resulting in the further growth of myths and legends. We must note that the Vedic Aryans always emerged as victorious under the undaunted leadership of their war-god, Indra. The Vedic poets saw in the god the manifestation of their mythological imagination and, therefore, we see in Indra the successful transformation of the conqueror of human foes into the conqueror of such natural powers like drought, flood or darkness which inflict evil to people. So they superimposed the image of rain-god on Indra who could shatter the demon Vṛtra holding up rains with the help of his thunderbolt and thus bringing down the downpour. In this way Indra occupied the place of the original rain- god Tṛta- Āptya of the Vedic religion. There had also been attempts to find in Indra image of the

¹⁷ The Age of the Guptas and other Essays: New Delhi, 1982. p. 335

sun-god overpowering the demon of winter or darkness. One cannot deny in this context the fact that the Vedic people had in mind the idea of glorifying the heroic deeds of Indra in the process of which they consciously identified him as the mythical hero, conquering the dragon Vṛtra- originally 'the representative leader of the general foes of the Vedic Aryans and later regarded as the cloud-demon or the winter-demon or the demon of darkness'.¹⁸

A lot of work has been done on this particular topic, different theories have been set forth in the process of interpreting it in manifold ways. So I give up my efforts of mentioning each opinion furthermore since one opinion neutralizes the other. And always there is the possibility of confusing the theme itself because some of the scholars have declared Indra as the personification of thunderstorm and consequently considered the Indra-Vṛtra battle as indicative of the phenomenon of thunderstorm, lightning, and rain, while it is interesting to note that in all such descriptions, words indicating thunder, cloud, lightning, rain etc. seldom occur directly. However, the epithet *vṛṣan* which means 'the sprinkler' shows his association with rain. The symbolism that seems to underlie this myth has been only suggestive of the phenomenon of thunderstorm and rain which the Vedic poet-seers intended to bring out through the glowing *mantras* to Indra. Scholars like Bergaigne think that there can be found no clear mention or reference of Indra's being a deity who was directly responsible in bringing about rain. Moreover, we do not find any reason as to why Indra, the principal war-god of the Vedic Aryans has been connected with the concept of a rain-god especially when the Vedic poets had one rain god- *Ṛta-Āptya* worshipped by their ancestors and *Varuṇa*, the great Cosmic-god. Thus we may conclude that it is by the purposeful efforts of the conscious artists that the principal god Indra was transformed into a rain-god who was eventually described as superseding the original rain-god and the cosmic god of the Aryans and in *ṚV.I.52.5* we get the description of how Indra took over the role of the rain-god from *Ṛta-Āptya*. A large portion of the *Ṛgveda* and especially the hymn IV.42 indicates clearly that *Varuṇa*-religion was being superseded by the *Indra*-religion which was coming to the fore front rapidly.

To conclude, the *Ṛgvedic* poets were all 'seers'- they are called 'ṛṣis'. *ṛṣih darśanāt*, which means - He is a seer because he has a vision. The songs or prayers are not composed but are revealed to the Vedic poets who did not artificially work up and compose them in the ordinary sense of the world. The poetry in the *Ṛgveda* is indeed spontaneous. Then to explain the simultaneous existence of the two very

¹⁸ *ibid*, p.337

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opposite qualities in a R̥gvedic *mantra* and to answer the question if we can call them as 'conscious poets'- become very difficult. The simple fact is that the thought is conceived and felt spontaneously, while expressing it verbally there might have involved a conscious effort. Poets, unlike philosophers, always try to touch transcendental feeling within ourselves, as we all know; profound thoughts and high aspirations can be expressed very naturally under the garb of poetry.

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